

## ARTICLES USED IN SINHALESE CEREMONIAL DANCING.

Ceremonies connected with the daily life of the Sinhalese are numerous and varied in their character. Every social and domestic event has its form of ceremony or a number of ceremonies. Birth, childhood, feeding of a child, cropping of his hair, puberty, marriage, travel, sickness and death, the building of a house, business, games, agriculture, from felling a forest to ploughing, sowing, reaping, and thrashing and storing of crops have all their special ceremonies.

The ceremonies themselves consist in making offerings, incantations, charms and dances. These again are connected with spirits both benevolent and evil and can be roughly divided under three heads, *viz.*:—The propitiation of planets and planetary spirits, the propitiation of benevolent spirits, the propitiation of demons or evil spirits.

In this communication I propose to describe some of the articles used in such ceremonial dances.

In all ceremonial dances the first step taken is the purification of those who are taking part in the dances and those for whose benefit the dancing is performed. The process of purification differs to some extent in accordance with the class of ceremony. Those who take part in the ceremonies are required to abstain from certain forms of food for at least twenty-four hours before the ceremonies. Abstinence from meat and fish of all forms is enjoined in many cases. Bathing and the use of freshly cleaned white cloth form a part of the purification ceremonies. In addition to these just prior to a ceremony four articles are used as purificants: A specially prepared medicated water for washing the head, a preparation for sprinkling over the face and body, ashes used for rubbing over the forehead and arms, and

incense with which the person is fumigated. The preparation for application to the head is known as *Nanu*, it is usually made by using the juice of various aromatic leaves and roots, such as leaves of *Divul* (*Feronia elephantas*), *Nuga* (*Ficus*); roots such as *Kalanduru* (*Cyperus*); woods such as Sandalwood and other articles as camphor, etc. The origin of *Nanu* and the form of its ceremonial application are described in many incantations. In place of a mixture of medicated juices, boiled lime fruit bruised in water is more frequently used for this purpose. *Nanu* is carried in a *Thetiya* or plate.

There are two preparations of water used for bathing the face and for sprinkling over the body as purificants: one is water in which boiled cows' milk is mixed and the other is water in which the juice of the root of turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) is mixed. These preparations are usually placed in a pot (*kotale*) shaped somewhat in the form of a kettle with a spout from which the water can be poured.

The ashes used for purification purposes are obtained by the incineration of cows' dung. The ash is pure white and is rubbed over the forehead, neck and arms. Ash as a purificant is seldom used in the Sinhalese districts except in connection with ceremonies where Sivite influence predominates.

Incense is made of ground resin thrown over red hot charcoal, aromatic gums are sometimes used for this purpose, but ground resin or *dummala* is the article which is commonly used.

The decorations of the dancing places are carried out in accordance with prescribed forms, each division of dancers has its own form of decoration. In the case of the planetary gods, images of the planets and their attendant spirits are made of clay and painted over and placed in the shed where the dances take place. There are a large number of combinations of such images made and coloured in accordance with definite rules laid down for their construction. In connection with dances

dedicated to benevolent spirits and evil spirits we have a number of typical decorative forms: plantain stalks, tender coconut leaves and flowers are the main articles with which the decorations are made. The gateway or *a torana* is constructed facing the dancing shed. Behind the *torana* (gateway) is constructed the *veediya* or the passage.

The following description of the construction and decoration of a place where ceremonial dances are held can be taken as typical. There are slight variations in accordance with the form of the ceremony.

After the site is selected the first ceremony is that of planting the first pillar, or post for the building. It is carried out to the accompaniment of many rites and incantations. The pole selected is a smooth and straight one, it is decorated with tender coconut leaves, flowers and coconut fruits and covered on the top with a new earthenware water pot. The following verses describe in some detail a *Kapa* or post and the method of planting it.

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Decking with bunches of *Tembili* (king coconuts) *Gin* nuts, (*Nipa* palm) and *Kitul* (*Caryota* palm) nuts and bunches of *dotalu* (*Toxococcus* palm), arecanut and *Indi* (*Phoenix*).

And offering twelve handfuls of pearly rice grains at the foot of the post.

So that all the ills of evil influences may disappear like a drop of dew.

The post is planted after hailing three times the gods of the three worlds.

And hailing long life by proclaiming in the ten directions while going three times round the post.

And offering tributes of gold and silver on the foundation when the pole is planted.

The post is planted in a proper manner after incanting the twelve forms of songs.

The first construction and decoration is the gateway or *torana*. The height of the gateway is seven spans and six inches, i.e., 69 inches, and the breadth is six spans and three inches (57 inches). Nine arches made on the sides and eight doorways are constructed and in the four corners four flagstaffs are placed, decorated on the top with three circles of tender coconut leaves.

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A *torana* for kings is decorated with gold, for brahmans with gems, for merchants with cloth and for others with tender plantain leaves. As regards the colour scheme, the top arch is draped in red, the second in blue and third in white, the terminals are surmounted with four golden pinnacles.

Next to the *torana* comes *vidiya* or passage, where the dances take place. There are eight entrances to the *vidiya* in the eight corners, each entrance being 48 inches; 26 stands are made within the *vidiya*, at equal distances, for placing offerings and eight trays of flowers are placed on the ground in the eight corners and 24 pots filled with flowers and with lighted lamps are placed around the *vidiya*.

On one side of the dancing shed a seat is made for the accommodation of the person on whose behalf the ceremony is performed.

A figure is drawn with ashes and rice grains in the form of two squares placed across each other, so that the angles of each square will form distinct triangles, thus making eight connected triangles known as *atamagala*. For an ordinary person a low wooden stool covered with a mat is placed as a seat backed with a rice pounder placed behind. For those of rank a special seat is constructed rising in seven tiers. The ground floor of the seat is 68 inches each side, the next one is 60 inches, the next 50 inches, the fourth is 40 inches, the fifth 35 inches, the sixth 28 inches and the seventh 18 inches.

Offerings usually consist of lights, flowers, leaves, grain, cooked food, roasted meats and live animals.

Lights consist of single wick heart-shaped lamps where vegetable oils, or ghee is burnt. There are also square lamps made of metal or clay with four wicks and lamps made of metal, usually of brass, with 7 wicks. Small slender torches made by wrapping cotton rags on a length of bamboo or wood splinter and dipped in vegetable oil are also used. Large sized torches similarly made and lighted are carried in the hands of dancers, sometimes a single one is used in one hand and often two lighted torches in both hands. The effect of the light is intensified by throwing ground resin on to the flames of these torches, the flashes caused by the burning of the ground resin is directed to give the effect of what may be called a heaped fire. The dancers sometimes use an additional three-pronged lighted torch carried in their mouths.

Wild flowers of varied colours are used as offerings to spirits. The flower of the coconut and the arecanut palm are largely used, and the red ixora flower, the orange coloured champac flower, the highly scented myristic flower (*rukmal*), the white jasmine and Idda (*Wrightea*) and the blue gentian are commonly used.

The betel leaf (*Chavica*) forms an important part of the offerings made, other leaves that are offered are *Tolobo* (*Crinum asiaticum*) and *Heressa* (*Vitis quadrangularis*). Grains of husked rice and millets are also placed with the flowers and leaves as offerings.

In regard to cooked foods, rice cooked in coconut milk or cows' milk and rice cakes and sweets are common offerings made to planetary spirits and benevolent spirits. Evil spirits are offered blood and meats usually roasted and burnt, the smell of which is believed to be more attractive to them than the more delicate foods offered to the higher spirits.

Live animals are often offered to evil spirits, a goat forms a quadruped offering and a fowl a biped offering. Sometimes the dancer offers himself as an offering to the evil spirit in place of a patient who is supposed to be under his influence.

The music at these dances consists of a reed flute blown similar to a sharp whistle said to attract evil spirits. A chank shell is blown in honour of planetary gods and higher spirits.

Three kinds of drums are used as music offerings as well as for keeping time in the dances. The *udekki* is a small drum about a foot in length and narrowed in the middle of the trunk, the leather is stretched on the two faces of the drum and is kept together by a series of strings which by being held with the closed fist at the narrowed portion of the trunk can be loosened or tightened with the fingers while the drum is being played with one hand. A second kind of drum is the *geta bera*, a large sized drum about two and a half feet in length with the centre bulging out and narrowing towards the two ends, the faces of the drum are fitted with leather and strung with string made of hide. The third is the long, cylindrical drum, about a foot in diameter and three feet in length, fitted with leather on each face and strung together with hide strings which can be tightened to vary the sounds. These drums make the loudest of noise when played with the palms and the fingers. The art of playing the drums has been very carefully cultivated and requires considerable practice. There are two hundred and sixteen different tunes described in the books, from the simplest to a complicated combination of tunes, and the shortest to the longest, and slowest to the loudest. There are

tunes that are played as a music offering to the spirits both good and evil and tunes that are played as an accompaniment to incantations and dances.

The only other musical instrument indicated in ceremonial dances is a string instrument played with a string bow known as a *Vinawa*, but it is very seldom used at present, the dancers only using an imitation of it made in wood and make a pretence of playing it.

Next come bells and jingles. A hand bell used by a dancer is sounded as a music offering to planetary gods and benevolent spirits. Bells are not used when the dance is connected with evil spirits. Dancers always wear bunches of jingles round their ankles, which sound as they step out, they also wear hollow metal armlets filled with loose beads of metal. In certain ceremonies dancers carry metal discs in each hand and beat them to keep time, these are known as *talam*.

The dresses worn by those taking part in dances are varied according to the nature of the dance. The players on the drums wear a short white cloth round their loins with a broad band of turkey-red cloth round their waists, they tie a white turban round their heads with the two ends of the turban cloth hanging down. They also wear earrings and armlets, and in the body they often wear metal or bead chains.

Those who take part in dances connected with planetary gods and devas or higher spirits usually tie a folded red or white cloth round their heads with ends hanging down. A white cloth is worn on the loins with a large number of pleats and often secured in the form of loose pants. A folded waistcloth is tied round the waist and a short-sleeved coloured or white jacket is worn over the upper part of the body, sometimes its place is taken by head or metal strings. In other ceremonial dances various forms of head-dresses are used, from a coloured or ornamented cap to crowns made of metal or palm leaves and bunches of long strips of tender leaves of the coconut palm worn in the form of loose hanging hair. The jackets worn are coloured and



embroidered. Over tight-fitting pants are worn embroidered pleated skirts, red and blue. Some of these skirts are made with a number of circles of frills from the waist downwards. In certain forms of ceremonial dances a series of masks are used.

These masks are worn to represent different evil spirits. The largest of these masks are worn to represent *Rakshasas*—cruel, hideous and powerful spirits who are believed to cause sickness. Large tusk-like teeth, prominent bulging eyes, and hideous representations of hoods of serpents form the main features of these masks. The dancers who wear these make vigorous movements and represent the hideousness of the *Rakshasas* in their dances.

In one form of ceremony known as *Sanni Samayama* the evil spirits that cause diseases are represented in a series of eighteen different masked forms. All possible illnesses come under one of these eighteen classifications and each of the evil spirits is made to appear in its appropriate dress and mask and to receive offerings from the hands of the patient.

The eighteen forms are:—

Buta	...	Delirium
Abuta	...	Prostration
Amukku	...	Shivering
Vedi	...	Fits
Vata	...	Paralytic
Bihiri	...	Insomnia
Kana	...	Ulcers
Pith	...	Billious
Golu	...	Ferocious
Kola	...	Swollen Throat
Murtu	...	Deadly
Demala	...	Disease of the stomach
Naga	...	Disease of the glands
Kora	...	Lame
Ginijal	...	High fever
Gulma	...	Abdominal pains
Sitala	...	Cold shivers
Deva	...	Hypnotic

There are a number of articles used in ceremonial dances for invoking blessings on those on whose behalf the ceremonies are performed. These are the insignia or special weapons dedicated to each of the spirits:—

The Goddess Pattini has the anklet and the mango fruit. Kartikaya or Kataragama, the sword. Vishnu, the golden bow and arrow. Dedimunda, the club, etc.

A pot in which flowers are placed, known as *punkalasa* or filled pot, a white or silk cloth (*Saluwa*), a branch of mango leaves, and sometimes the leaves of the *Burulla* (Lea) are also used with appropriate incantations.

The fruit of the lime is cut with a *Gira* (arecanut cutter) to the accompaniments of charms and incantations as a special means of counteracting spells.

Another article used in counteracting spells and evil influences is an earthenware pot known as *Púnava*. A *púnava* is made in the shape of a leopard's head, with twelve spouts and seven ridges with seven hoods of snakes. Twigs from five species of citrus, five kinds of flowers, five kinds of oils, five kinds of wax, five kinds of spice, resins, camphor and lights are offered to the *púnava*. After incantations the vessel is placed on the back of a red bull and taken to a river or a lake, the *púnava* is immersed and broken when it is under water.

The ceremony and the offerings are somewhat peculiar and it is believed to remove in particular the evils resulting from false oaths. It is mentioned that the ceremony was introduced at the time of King Pandukabhaya about four centuries before the Christian era, and was performed to ward off a sickness from which the king was suffering at the time. It is interesting to note that the king's illness was attributed to evils consequent of a predecessor of his, King Vijaya, breaking the oath he made before he married the Yakka princess Kuveni. Subsequently Vijaya discarded Kuveni in spite of his oath and married a Royal princess from Madura. The curse that fell on the line of the first Sinhalese king is believed to have affected even his successors.

During ceremonial dances reference is made to various forms of games and sport and sometimes they are acted in the dances. The games of coconut throwing and horn pulling, *Polkeliya* and *Apkeliya*, which were very popular among the Sinhalese at one time, were connected with the ceremonies of goddess Pattini.

Horn pulling at one time had become a very popular game and inhabitants of whole villages were divided into two sides even from their birth and the game was an annual one, where thousands gathered to witness it, or take part in it. Robert Knox describes the game and its popularity in the following passage:—"The manner of the game is thus: they have two crooked sticks like elbows, one hooked into the other so with contrivances, they pull with ropes until the one break the other, some siding with one stick some with the other: but never is money laid on either side. Upon the breaking of the stick the party that hath won doth not a little rejoice."

4. His Excellency in thanking Mr. W. A. de Silva, said: that as nobody had anything to say he would like to make a few remarks himself. I have been greatly interested in all that Mr. Silva had to say because I have seen many of these dances here and I have been struck with not only the dresses of the dancers but by the steps which they take. They have very similar steps to those which I have seen in many other places besides Ceylon and I was wondering whether Mr. de Silva was going to make any remarks in connection with those steps whether they were in existence here for a number of years or whether the dancers from time to time introduced new ones. I cannot help thinking there may have been some connection many years ago between the dances in Ceylon and possibly in parts of India with those I have seen in all parts of Africa. I was watching on the last occasion the Perahera in Kandy given in honour of the Crown Prince of Japan and the Crown Prince himself asked me whether these steps were of long existence here or whether they had been introduced quite lately in Ceylon because they very closely resembled those he had seen in Japan and they closely resembled the steps I had seen in many parts of Africa, especially the South. It is interesting and I cannot help believing myself that they had been introduced to the north part of Africa from India and possibly from Ceylon or Zanzibar. We know that years ago and even up to the present time there was a great deal of inter-communication between Zanzibar and Ceylon. I have seen many head-dresses in many parts of Ceylon. Then again as regards drums I can't help thinking that either the West must have copied from the East, because the military drum is a very similar article to the one which I see here. It is almost a similar type to the ordinary military kettle drum because I cannot help thinking that the military drum must have taken its shape and formation and system

from the drums in the East here. Generally speaking from the many similarities with regard to these dances and the forms and articles worn there must have been in my opinion some connection in the old days between the dances of the East and those I have seen in Africa, and particularly in the anklets, which are precisely similar to those which I have seen in some of the tribes on the East coast of Africa. The dresses too, worn by the dancers, are so very similar. I should myself like to know from Mr. de Silva whether he is of opinion that it would be possible that first of all these steps of the dances have been handed down from past generations or whether it is that as the dances go on from time to time they alter the dances and introduce new steps. Personally I am of opinion that they must have come down from some very ancient time. We must all agree that Mr. de Silva's lecture has been a very excellent one, and he has introduced us to things which make us understand these dances which one does not ordinarily look upon beyond the ugly side. We see now there is a ceremonial connection with them which I had not understood before. I am enlightened now in connection with a great deal of these ceremonies. I understand things now which I did not understand before and which must have been very interesting to the audience here to-night.

Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam proposed a vote of thanks to His Excellency the Governor for his kindness in honouring the Society with his presence and presiding on this occasion and for the interesting contribution which he had made to the subject of the lecture.

Replying to a query of His Excellency as to whether the Kettle-drum such as exhibited to-day was borrowed by the West from the East or *vice versa*, Sir Ponnambalam said that military drums, music and flags passed into Europe from the East during the wars of the Crusades. Not only these and other external symbols of Eastern civilization, but, as Green says in his History of the English people, a great intellectual impulse was given to the West by its contact with the more civilized East. The establishment of the great schools which bore the name of Universities was, he says, everywhere throughout Europe the special mark of the new impulse that Christendom gained from the Crusades, and the long mental inactivity of feudal Europe was broken up like ice before a summer's sun.

On the subject of dancing, there was a great difference in the point of view between Eastern and Western nations. In Europe, at least in modern times, dancing is regarded as a light form of recreation indulged in by young people through sheer *joie de vivre*. But among ancient nations, both in the West and the East, a dance was a very solemn religious ceremony. A primitive people, when they wanted sun or wind or rain, did not go to church and ask their gods for it, but summoned their tribe and danced a sun dance or a wind dance or a rain dance. When they wanted to hunt and catch a bear, they rehearsed the hunt in a bear dance. Even in modern times (as Dr. Frazer has mentioned in his great book: "The Golden Bough") in many parts of Germany, Austria and Macedonia, the peasant thinks he can make the corn or the flax grow by dancing or leaping high and throwing his spade up into the air and exclaiming, "Let the crop grow as high as the spade has gone." This feeling shows itself nowadays when you watch an exciting game of tennis or billiards and you find a

spectator doing in sheer sympathy the thing he wants done by the player, reaching out his arm where the billiard cue should go or raising a leg to help the ball over the net.

Sir Ponnambalam had hoped that the lecturer would have touched on and developed this line of thought of dancing as a sort of prayer or sympathetic magic. He hoped that the lecturer might do so in the next lecture he has promised. He will find much material in the works of Dr. Frazer, W. Robertson Smith, Professor Gilbert Murray, Miss Jane Harrison and others.

The vote of thanks to His Excellency the Governor was carried with acclamation.

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The following paper by Dr. S. C. Paul, M.D., F.R.C.S., was read at a meeting of the Society held on February 20th, 1919:—  
“The Overlordship of Ceylon in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries.” \*

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\* *Vide* Vol. XXVIII., No. 72, page 1.